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## **Ready to Have a Baby? Boost Your Health First.**

Fifty percent of pregnancies are unplanned; report urges women to eat well, exercise, and avoid smoking, regardless of whether they plan to have a child

LOS ANGELES – A report on the health of women in Los Angeles County notes that 50 percent of all pregnancies are unplanned, meaning many women may not be physically prepared to have a baby. Because of this, many babies may not receive the benefits of proper nutrition or adequate exercise from their mothers before they are born. The report, *Healthy Women, Healthy Children: Preconception Health in LA County: Women’s Health in the Reproductive Years*, examines the health of all women of reproductive age, which is generally considered to be between 15 and 44 years.

“As women think about when or whether to have children, they should also think about how to improve their health first. The opportunity to impact the health of a baby starts before conception, and the health of a potential mother should be a priority long before pregnancy,” said Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, MPH, Director of Public Health and Health Officer. “All women, regardless of age or whether they plan to get pregnant, should strive to maintain a healthy weight, eat a well-balanced diet, avoid tobacco, excessive alcohol and recreational drugs, and get at least 30-minutes of moderate physical activity a day.”

The report, released today by the LA County Department of Public Health, outlines positive health habits that all women should adopt. **These steps include:**

- Making a reproductive life plan, determining if and when to have children.
- Striving to attain a healthy weight through good nutrition and exercise.
- Learning how to manage stress and getting help for feelings of sadness or depression.
- Engaging in moderate (gardening) to vigorous (running, bicycling) exercise for 20-30 minutes a day, at least three times per week.
- Eating a well-balanced diet that includes at least 400 micrograms of folic acid and five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Avoiding alcohol for at least three months before trying to become pregnant.

Good nutrition is essential, as more than half of all new mothers reported they did not take folic acid before becoming pregnant. Expectant mothers’ consumption of at least 400 micrograms of folic acid each day reduces the rate of neural tube defects, such as spina bifida, in their babies, and reduces the mother’s rate of pregnancy-induced hypertension (pre-eclampsia).

“All women should think ‘me first’ when it comes to their health,” said Cynthia A. Harding, MPH, Director of Public Health Maternal, Child, and Adolescent Health Programs. “The duration of pregnancy itself is too brief to optimally manage chronic health conditions, such as diabetes and obesity, and may not be enough time to eliminate behaviors that threaten a baby’s



health, such as smoking and alcohol use. By continuously maintaining a healthy lifestyle, women can ensure that they enjoy longer, more fulfilling lives, and that any future children they have may do the same.”

**Also in the report:**

- In LA County, 51 percent of women of childbearing age are Latina, 26 percent are white, 13 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 10 percent are African American.
- More than 150,000 babies are born in LA County each year.
- 20 percent of women of reproductive age reported they did not have a regular source of health care, and 33 percent of mothers who recently delivered a baby lacked a regular source of health care.
- Among women of childbearing age, 15 percent reported being previously diagnosed with depression. During pregnancy, Latinas and African Americans reported higher rates of depressive symptoms compared to whites and Asians/Pacific Islanders.
- More than one-third of women 18-44 years old reported engaging in minimal to no physical activity in a typical week.
- Among women of childbearing age, 20 percent were obese, with higher rates among African Americans and Latinas, compared to Asians/Pacific Islanders and whites.

A copy of the full report is available online at: <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/ha>. Information on improving healthy habits for women of childbearing age can be found at: <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/mch>.

The Los Angeles County Preconception Health Collaborative strives to improve the health of women by integrating the efforts of multiple local agencies concerned with maternal and child health. These include the LA County Department of Public Health, California Family Health Council, LA Best Babies Network, March of Dimes, PAC/LAC, and PHFE-WIC Program. The Collaborative aims to incorporate preconception health care into public health practice and medical care to reduce disparities in maternal and infant health.

The Department of Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control, and community and family health. Public Health comprises more than 4,000 employees and has an annual budget exceeding \$750 million. To learn more about Public Health and the work we do, please visit <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov>, visit our YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/lapublichealth>, or follow us on Twitter: LAPublicHealth.

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